

# Peasant Movements in Colonial India

North Bihar 1917-1942



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# **Peasant Movements in Colonial India**

North Bihar 1917-1942

**Stephen Henningham**



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*To the Memory of*  
**MERLE FLORENCE GREER, 1914-1979**

## ABBREVIATIONS

AAR	Annual Administrative Report
AICCP	All-India Congress Committee Papers
BSA	Bihar State Archives
C	Collection
f	file
F	Fash
FMP	Freedom Movement Papers
FR	Fortnightly Report
FR(1)	Fortnightly Report for first half of month
FR(2)	Fortnightly Report for second half of month
G	General Department, Raj Darbhanga Archives
GGB	Government of Great Britain
GB	Government of Bihar
GBEN	Government of Bengal
GO	Government of Bihar and Orissa
GOI	Government of India
HP	Home Political Department [of the Government of India]
IOL	India Office Library
JPNP	Jay Prakash Narayan Papers
KW	Keep With (a file)
L	Law Department, Raj Darbhanga Archives
LR	Land Revenue Proceedings
NAI	National Archives of India
NML	Nehru Memorial Library
PP	Rajendra Prasad Papers
PS	Political Special Department [of the Government of Bihar (and Orissa)]
RDA	Raj Darbhanga Archives
WBA	West Bengal Archives

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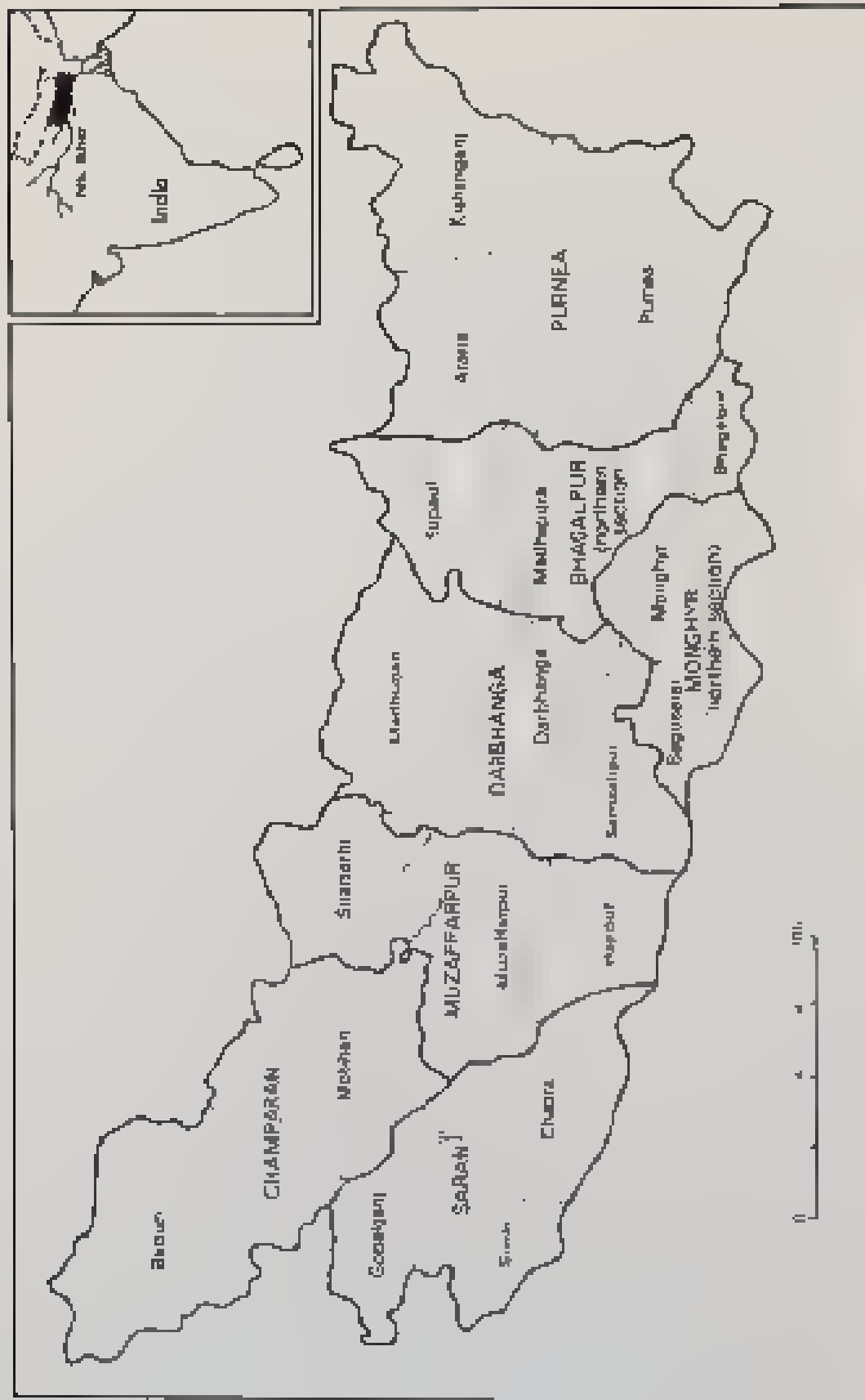
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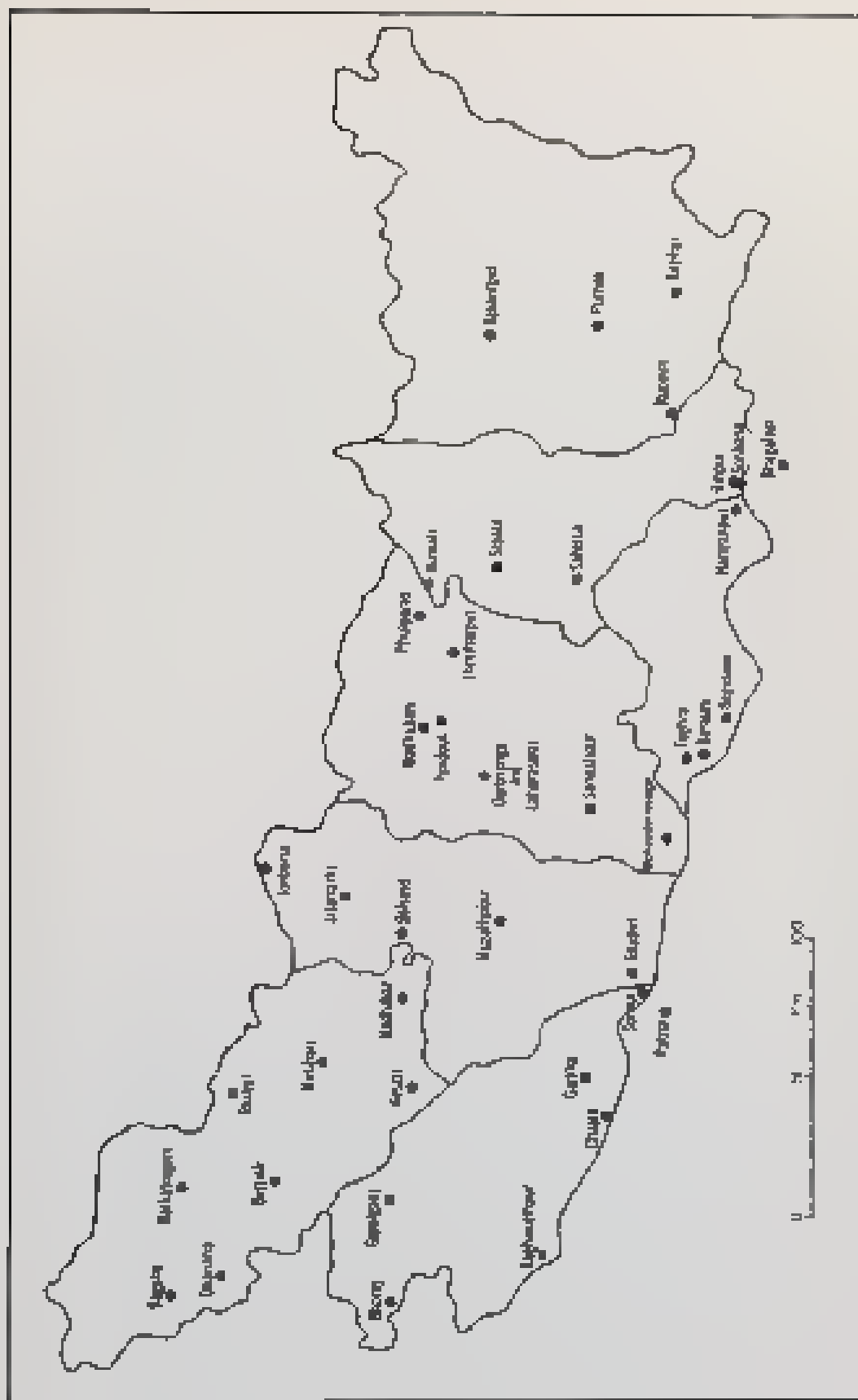
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Map 2. North Bihar: Towns and Villages



## INTRODUCTION

In August 1942 a revolt erupted throughout India, reaching its peak in the region of north Bihar. In north Bihar the rebels tore up railway lines, demolished bridges, and attacked the British and their allies. At Rupauli in Purnea district they burnt three policemen alive in their station house. At Marhwarab in Muzaffarpur district they killed five British soldiers and an Anglo-Indian civilian. The north Bihar authorities found it necessary to concentrate their forces in the towns, and only regained control of the countryside through the deployment of a substantial military force.

The 1942 revolt was the sixth major peasant movement to occur in north Bihar within the quarter-century beginning in 1917. The anti-planter movement of 1917-23 and Swami Vidyabandha's campaign of 1919-20 were critical of aspects of the region's agrarian system. In contrast the non-cooperation movement of 1920-21 and the civil disobedience campaigns of 1930-34 challenged the framework of British rule rather than the structure of agrarian relations which provided its foundation. In 1936-39 the *kisan sabha* (peasant association) movement raised criticisms of the institution of zamindari landholding, which formed the core of the agrarian system.

In an impoverished and rigidly neo-feudal society the mobilisation of the peasantry offered an opportunity for the emergence of a radical challenge to the social order. This opportunity seemed particularly great in August 1942, with the temporary collapse of the law and order apparatus of the colonial state. Yet the peasants did not challenge the social order, neither in August 1942 nor during any of the five earlier movements. Why, in the 1917-42 period, did no radical challenge to the social order develop? Why did the peasants of north Bihar seek merely to reform existing social and political arrangements instead of attempting to transform the social structure to bring about a more equitable distribution of wealth and power?







collection of land revenue. But the stability of this basis was threatened because the pressure of population growth on a sluggish agrarian economy was increasing the potential for the widespread occurrence of conflict. In this chapter the social structure in north Bihar is described, conflict and its control, are discussed. The framework of British rule is examined, and the effects of world war on the region's economic and social structure are discussed.

## 1

In the early twentieth century north Bihar had a overwhelmingly agrarian economy and society. Less than 5 per cent of the region's inhabitants lived in towns, and for out of every five of them depended directly on agriculture for their livelihood. Land provided the chief resource and an individual's standing depended upon his relationship to it. Within the 20,000 or so villages where the vast majority of north Biharis lived, a caste system generally prevailed. Within the villages three social levels can be distinguished, albeit with imprecise boundaries. At the top were the zamindars and rich peasants. Beneath them were middle peasants, and at the bottom were poor peasants.<sup>2</sup>

The poor peasants were characteristically low caste Harijans, or low status Muslims, and comprised around 40 per cent of the population. The poor peasants may be defined by their possession of insufficient land on which to subsist, which meant that in some cases they tenanted wholly or partially on the sale of their labour. They included sharecroppers, short-term tenants, petty occupancy tenants, and landless labourers. They also incorporated village artisans and fishermen, who characteristically combined their occupations with small-scale cultivation and with agricultural labour.

The middle peasants generally came from middle and low castes and comprised some 40 per cent of the population. Their defining characteristic was control of sufficient land, generally as occupancy tenants but occasionally as petty zamindars, to provide subsistence through the use of family labour, thus freeing them from the necessity to



They also occupied a common position in relation to those who held power outside the world of the villages. The direct power of the members of the village elite was limited to their immediate locality. To exert influence beyond their village they needed to forge alliances with the elites of other villages and to interact with the great landlords and the urban bourgeoisie and administrative elite.

divided the world of the villages into a group of great landlords, who were several in number, and a group of great village chiefs who had been away in the Mathas. Their former princely status means that, in contrast to the movements to west of the Jamnagar estate, the region their properties had been held together through an empire. The leading great landlord, was Rameshwar Singh Maharaja of the Jamnagar Raj, eighteenth century of landed magnates that had come to power in the late years of the Mughal Brahman community, the elite religious community of Hindu Rameshwar Singh's property covered some 2,400 square miles, which was about 15 per cent of the total area of north Bihar. He was paid received from land rents and some of approximately Rs 4,00,000 were paid 10 per cent of this income as land revenue and 5 per cent of the province government, and spent another 10 to 15 per cent in the administrative costs of running his lands spread over a wide area. The remainder was presented by the prince to the state in the form of land and real estate, and real estate formed a substantial sum much of it spent in a manner befitting a Maharaja of an ancient line.

The Maharaja of Lar, a great feudatory of the British, had a large estate in the district and his properties in the district were divided into two parts, one in the north and one in the south. The Maharaja of Lar, a great feudatory of the British, had a large estate in the district and his properties in the district were divided into two parts, one in the north and one in the south. The Maharaja of Lar, a great feudatory of the British, had a large estate in the district and his properties in the district were divided into two parts, one in the north and one in the south.

Also outside the world of the villages were the towns of north Bihar. Less than 3 per cent of the population lived in the towns, which were sleepy backwaters rather than dynamic centres of growth. Patna, the nearest large urban centre and itself scarcely a thriving metropolis, lay south of the broad stream of the Ganges. The population of the towns consisted of professionals, government servants, bankers, merchants, shopkeepers, artisans and unskilled labourers. The professionals and government servants came from high caste backgrounds and had kinship and mutual interest ties with the landlords and the rich peasants. The bankers and larger merchants came from the Marwari and other Hindu trading communities and underwrote the money changing activities of small landlords and rich peasants. Muslims comprised the majority of the smaller shopkeepers and artisans, while the unskilled workers were generally low caste or Harijan. For a schematic representation of the structure of north Bihar society, please refer to Diagram 1.1 page 4.

## II

In north Bihar grave inequality in the distribution of property provided potential for the rise of tension and the emergence of conflict, but it also frequently also created the relations of dependence which knit society together. In the villages the small landlords and the rich peasants controlled most of the land. In consequence they dominated the grain market, controlled the supply and distribution of credit and decided the agrarian labourers' employment prospects and their wages and working conditions. Poor peasants were at the beck and call of rich peasants and small landlords. Through their possession of land they were wealthier than most, but the peasants had more independence but they were generally entrapped within the credit and grain dealing networks operated by those above them in the social scale.

These relations of dependence were reinforced through the caste system. North Bihar had a predominantly Hindu population, and the caste hierarchy mirrored and reinforced and was reinforced by the unequal distribution of economic and political power. The only substantial Hindu group consisted of Muslims, who made up 10 per

DIAGRAM 1.1

## Social Structure in North Bihar, circa 1900

Agricultural Occupations	Non-Agricultural Occupations
<p>The great landlords (high caste)</p> <p>European indigo planters</p>	
<p>The village elite: small landlords and rich peasants (high caste)</p>	<p>Lawyers, teachers, doctors and other professionals, money lenders and big traders (high and middle caste)</p>
<p>Middle peasantry: occupancy tenants and some petty zamindars (middle and low caste)</p>	<p>Artisans and small traders (middle and low caste)</p>
<p>Poor peasants dwarf- holders, sharecroppers and labourers (low caste, Adivasi and Harijan)</p>	<p>Servants (low caste)</p>
	<p>Scavengers (Harijan)</p>

cent of the population.<sup>4</sup> A small number of Musams were notable as large zamindars, while the rest of the community were dispersed throughout village society.<sup>5</sup> For information on the size of the region's main caste and community groups, please refer to table 1.1.

TABLE 1.1

## Caste and Community Groups in North Bihar, 1901

<u>Percentage of Population</u>	
<u>a) Hindu Groups</u>	
<u>Higher Caste*</u>	
Bhumihar	4.6
Brahman	4.7
Kayasth	1.4
Rajput	4.9
<u>Total Higher Caste Groups</u>	<u>15.6</u>
<u>Middle Caste</u>	
Koeri	4.8
Kurmi	3.0
Yadav	12.0
<u>Total Middle Caste Groups:</u>	<u>19.8</u>
<u>Lower Caste Groups</u> (including Harijan groups)	
Chamar	4.1
Dhanuk	3.0
Dusadh	5.0
Hajjam	1.4
Kalwar	1.1
Kamar	1.3
Kandu	2.4
Kewat	1.2

Percentage of PopulationLower Caste Groups (Cont d)

Kumhar	1.1
Maah	2.2
Musahar	2.6
Nunya	1.8
Tanti	2.3
Teb	3.0

Other groups (all less than  
one per cent of the total  
population) 15.4

Total Lower Caste and Harijan  
Groups 47.9

Total Hindus 83.3

b, Non Hindu Groups

Muslim 16.1

Miscellaneous (including  
Adivasis, Brahmins, Buddhists,  
Christians and others) 0.6

Total of all Groups 100

---

Source Census of India 1901, Provincial tables.

Figures adjusted to discount south gangetic  
portions of Monghyr and Bhagalpur districts

- \* Hindu groups are designated as higher, middle  
or lower caste in terms of their economic well  
being, political influence and social status.  
In most instances a high correlation existed  
between level of wealth, degree of influence  
and social rank. The Kayasths form a partial  
exception, but they are listed here as a 'higher



caste because their wealth and power, based on land holding and on their role as a hierarchy, were than compensated for their relatively low ritual status.

The ideology of the caste system only sanctioned political initiatives among high caste groups. This ideology presented society as unitary and unchangeably hierarchical and insisted that the only legitimate course open to the individual was to accept without complaint his position in the social order and to fulfil the duties and obligations imposed by that position. This ideology had been made concrete in an elaborate etiquette of day to day behaviour which, Barrington Moore comments, had decisive political results. 'Make a man feel humble by a thousand daily acts and he will act in a humble way'.<sup>48</sup>

The basic unit of the caste system, the *jati* or sub-caste, comprised an endogamous group whose members usually lived within a circumscribed geographical area. *Jatis* were internally differentiated economically. The poorer members of a *jati* generally gave a *dal* (grain) to and received patronage from their more prosperous *jati* fellows. Through their character as social pyramids, *jatis* formed part of the prevailing patron-client pattern of politics, and encouraged the factionalisation, along vertical axes, of village society.<sup>49</sup>

In north Bihar, Brahmanas, Kaputs and Bhumiars, also known as military Brahmanas and Bachars, predominated. These groups, although monopolised land owning and held first place among the tenantry. Brahmanas, Kaputs and Bhumiars constituted only a small proportion of the population of the region. Particular high caste groups were concentrated within particular areas. In a village studied by Kamashray Roy, more than one-fifth of the population were Brahmanas, while in the Begusarai area in north Mughayyara about one-fifth of the population were Bhumiars. In Saran district, Kaputs comprised 10 per cent of the population.<sup>50</sup> In a context in which, with the exception of the Yadavs, the other groups in the social hierarchy were so small, local concentration of Brahmanas, Kaputs and Bhumiars contributed to their social and political pre-

eminence. Members of the Kayasth caste also had great influence. The Kayasths functioned as a literati. They monopolised the post of patwari, or village accountant, occupied many positions in the lower ranks of the bureaucracy, and dominated the legal profession.

The Yadavs (also known as Golas and Ahars) and the Kurmis and Kurms predominated in the middle range of the social hierarchy. The Kurms and the Korms had a reputation as skilful handworkers and cultivators, while the Yadavs, the most numerous caste group in north Bihar, combined their traditional occupation of cow herding with tenancy cultivation.

Among the poor peasants low caste and Harijan groups predominated. Among the lower castes the Musahars and the Dhanuks formed the largest groups. Harijans comprised one-sixth of the north Bihar population. They were segregated into one of the three or four hamlets that made up the north Bihar village and suffered discrimination in every aspect of their lives. The Chamars and the Musahars were the two largest Harijan groups. In 1909 one official patronisingly described the Musahars as field labourers, whose wages are paid in kind. They live in a state of social slavery, sometimes selling themselves, their wives, and children to lifelong servitude for paltry sums.<sup>17</sup>

The inequalities which were integral to the relations of dependence in north Bihar contributed to social stagnation through their impact on the health and education of the mass of the people. The very conditions which provided reasons for tension curtailed its expression.

Among the mass of the population inadequate diet caused malnutrition, endangered the intellectual development of children, and made people easy targets for the impact of disease, an impact facilitated by the unsanitary, overcrowded conditions in which most people lived.<sup>18</sup> Every year, cholera and typhoid took their toll. Recurrent intestinal infections and hookworm were widespread, and adversely affected people's vitality. Malaria was widely prevalent: a survey done in the 1920s on children under ten years of age revealed that 7 per cent of them had an enlarged spleen as a result of malarial infection.<sup>19</sup> Good

health rarely existed among those who were worst fed and worst housed and most exploited. Those with the most reason to protest often had the least physical capacity to do so. One European planter, describing the workers employed in large concerns, condescendingly concluded that

They are mostly of the very poorest class. Many of them are plainly half blind, or wholly so; for, not a few are deaf and dumb, others are crippled or deformed, and numbers are apoplectic and servile. Numbers of them are afflicted in some districts with gutre, caused probably by bad drinking water, and have a pinched, withered, waxy look, that tells of hard work and insufficient fare."

Moreover, inadequate education circumscribed the horizons of the people and thus helped limit the expression of conflict and tension. Only the landed could afford to educate their children. Illiteracy was almost universal. In 1921, less than 5 per cent of the population could read and write.<sup>14</sup> Though adept in the long established means of winning a meagre living from the soil, villagers knew little of book-earning and of life and circumstances outside their immediate locality, and thus tended to accept existing circumstances as the only ones possible.

Poor communications limited the villager's mobility, and hence increased his parochialism and his dependence on the village elite. During the monsoon, movement became extremely difficult, and even during the dry seasons the railways were overburdened and the road system inadequate. Some villagers responded to oppression and economic pressure by migrating and others set out on long religious pilgrimages. But it seems that most lived their entire lives in close proximity to their place of birth.

Linguistic diversity strengthened parochialism. Most people spoke, as their first language, a distinctive village dialect current only in a limited area. In central and eastern north Bihar these dialects were part of the Maithili language, while in the west they formed the Bhojpuri language. Both languages were variants of Hindi, the lingua franca of the region. People from different areas could interact by means of Hindi, but their communication was imperfect.





body, on behalf of the provincial government, for routine administration. The Collector Magistrate, according to an official who served in the post, is elected as

the pivot on which the whole administration turns. All those below him are under his orders and engaged in assisting him, and those above him depend upon him for nomination and are engaged in giving him orders and instructions. 25

Junior officials known as sub-divisional officers assisted the Collector Magistrate with the revenue. Only one of the two or three sub-divisional officers of each district

Above the level of the district the division, supervised by a Divisional Commissioner, comprised the next unit of organisation. The District Division comprised the central and western districts of North Bihar — Arrahanga, Muzaffarpur, Sahar and Darbhanga — and had its head quarters at Muzaffarpur town. The remainder of the region comprising north Mughal, north Champaran and Patna lay within the Dargapour division, which also included territory in south Bihar, and which had headquarters at Bhagalpur town. The southern bank of the Ganges. The Divisional Commissioners reported to the provincial government, which was stationed at Patna during most of the year and at Ranchi in the full country in southern Bihar during the lean weather. The officers in charge of divisions, districts and subdivisions usually came of British stock and supervised a staff of Indian assistants and clerks.

District Officers carried out the day to day work of administration. They had responsibility for the maintenance of law and order, for the collection of the land revenue, for the well-being of the population and for the successful completion of a variety of more-laborious administrative duties. They sought to minimise social conflict by mediating between conflicting groups, using their authority to bring about a mutually acceptable settlement. District and Sub-divisional Officers carried a heavy burden, working in large, truckily populated areas in which communications were very poor. Elizabeth Whitcombe comments that, in the neighbouring United Provinces,

it was a easier matter for European officers in the later nineteenth century to have a district or another officer sanctioned away abroad than it was for them to cope with the problems of the performance of their duties.<sup>27</sup>

Local officials in Bihar found it even harder to keep up with the demands in their territories. The Bihar districts were twice as large as those in the other provinces, and because of its financial weakness the Bihar district government's processes that any other provincial government would have found it difficult to handle.

As Table 1 illustrates, Bihar and Orissa was the poorest of the four provinces in British India. Each year the province from land revenue alone had to raise Rs 1,00,000 per hundred head of population, which was less than half the average amount of Rs 4,500 raised by the other provinces. Unlike most of the other provinces, Bihar and Orissa could not profitably increase the amount of land revenue because, in common with the other areas in the frontier of British India, the receipts of Bihar and Orissa from land revenue had been depressed by the agrarian settlement of 1850, and had only been slightly marginally increased since then.

The British had incorporated the Permanent Settlement throughout the vast area incorporated within the former Bengal Presidency, which comprised the modern-day regions of Bangladesh, West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand, part of Orissa and parts of the modern-day state of Pradesh. The British imposed the Permanent Settlement to ensure a stable, fixed context of land holding in order to ensure economic and administrative stability by a vesting proprietary rights in the possession of established and controlling landlords and in demanding that the land revenue levied would be certified as zamindars' and that would not be increased.<sup>28</sup> The British administration exacted the land revenue demand according to a rigid timetable, irrespective of whether the harvest was good or bad, and in some parts of the Bengal Presidency social disruption occurred when established land controllers, unable to meet their revenue payments, had to sell their land to urban based speculators. In north Bihar, however, British revenue officials underestimated the productivity

of the land and hence demanded only a moderate land revenue, which permitted most of the land controlling families to retain their position.<sup>30</sup>

TABLE 1.2

Income and Expenditure (1927-28 Budgets) per 1,000 inhabitants of each province of British India

Jurisdiction	Revenue Rs.	Expenditure Rs.
Bihar and Orissa	1,669	1,766
Bangal	2,295	2,372
United Provinces	2,848	2,513
Assam	3,503	3,679
Madras	3,911	3,690
Central Provinces	4,036	4,229
Punjab	5,380	5,258
Burma	7,824	9,156
Bombay	8,003	8,227

Source Adapted from table in Government of Great Britain, *Indian Statutory Commission* (12 vols., London 1930), XII, p. 388.

The implementation of the Permanent Settlement established stability but had adverse effects on the finances of the British administration and on the economy of the region. By holding the land revenue demand constant the British ensured that any increase in the rental value of the land would benefit the zamindars. The British hoped that in order to be able to demand higher rents, the zamindars would improve agricultural methods and techniques so as to increase production. More generally, the British hoped that with the security of a clear title to the land the zamindars would display sufficient industry and initiative to bring prosperity to the region.<sup>31</sup> These hopes met with disappointment.



The zamindars were themselves, within a few years, British and cultural contacts entirely different from that in which the British improving landlords had emerged. To maintain and advance their local political position, zamindars sought to increase the number of peasantries under their control. They displayed little interest in new techniques and technologies which would enable them to employ less labour, and instead of re-investing their profits in agricultural improvement they used them to service extensive patronage and create new works and to bolster their prestige by means of conspicuous consumption.<sup>11</sup> They could prosper without becoming improving landlords. It was because British policy hindered the indigenous peasants' development which might have generated the agrarian reforming

Steady population growth allowed zamindars to increase their profits without changing their style of land management. They profited as formerly uncultivated lands came under the plough, and the growing demand for land meant that rents could be raised without a commensurate increase in production. In addition, an over supply of labour kept their wage but low. Most of the rising profits from land rent stayed with the zamindars. The designers of the Permanent Settlement intended that nine tenths of the rent collected by the zamindars should be passed on to the government as land revenue. By the end of the nineteenth century this officially approved ratio had become reversed, and one tenth of the rental income went to the government while the remainder stayed with the zamindars.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to their rental income, zamindars profited from the taxation of diwans, which were illegal but customarily sanctioned dues. They also engaged in money lending and grain dealing. Through their various earnings they cornered much of the agrarian surplus, only to dissipate it in non-productive ways. The peasant was suffering many of the pains of primitive accumulation, while society reaped none of the benefits.<sup>13</sup>

The Bihar and Orissa government could not demand more than a small portion of the agrarian surplus. Indeed, because of the original moderation of the landowner settlement in the region, the government's share of the surplus was even smaller than that extracted as land revenue elsewhere in the Bengal Presidency. Because of the agrarian

character of the provincial economy only limited funds could be raised from other sources, and the Government of India also subject to local limitations, was reluctant to give Bihar and Orissa special financial aid.<sup>15</sup> The provincial government had extremely limited funds yet had to provide administrative services to a numerous and rapidly increasing population. By 1911, when Bihar and Orissa were still part of the Bengal Presidency

the standard of expenditure in Bihar was lower than in any other province of India, and in Bengal the standard in Bihar and Orissa was little more than half of what it was in the rest of the province.<sup>16</sup>

Thus situated in the past for the past 150 years, the state of the administration of Bihar and Orissa the provincial government commented in 1917 "there has never been enough money in the past to provide any thing like an adequate standard."<sup>17</sup>

Because of financial stringency the Bihar and Orissa administration could have only a slight say over the police under its jurisdiction. In 1917 the management of a large part of the local revenue was in the hands of local and district officers, spread thinly throughout the twenty-five districts of the province. In northern Bihar less than forty district officers bore responsibility for the government and a square miles inhabited by more than 4 million people.<sup>18</sup> The provincial administration was like a fully equipped performer whose arms were tied behind his back collecting the land revenue and other taxes and preserving public order. Because of the great disparity between the amount the zamindars collected in rent and tribute and the amount they paid as revenue, the collection of land revenue tended to wait after the collection of excise, stamp and other duties also proceeded slowly. However the frequency of riots arising out of agrarian disputes and the high incidence of crime posed a challenge to the maintenance of public order. To curb the lawlessness and preserve order, the administration looked to the judiciary and to the police and chowkidars.

The British boasted that they had brought the rule of law to India, but in north Bihar their laws were "cobwebs for the rich and chains of steel for the poor."<sup>19</sup> The courts

TABLE 13

Expenditure (1927-28 Budgets) on administrative services  
per 1,000 inhabitants of each province of British India

Jurisdiction	Education		Medical		Public Health		Agriculture		Industries	
	Rs		Rs		Rs		Rs		Rs	
Bihar & Orissa	256		88		44		45		26	
Bengal	305		128		73		52		29	
United Provinces	392		77		58		68		29	
Assam	382		157		160		76		25	
Madras	514		179		82		82		49	
Central Provinces	407		114		28		127		21	
Punjab	753		229		101		264		42	
Burma	1,040		370		268		158		34	
Bombay	1,073		260		128		150		5	

Source Adapted from table in GGB, Statutory Commission,

XII. p 377.

filled a large number of disputes, but did not effectively redress grievances. Judicial processes moved at a snail's pace, the law was complex, vague and inconsistent, and the lower ranks of the legal profession were riddled with corruption. The rich and the influential exerted undue influence, and the tactic of harassing an enemy by 'getting on a false case against him was much used'. The enemy might indeed be convicted, and at the very least he would be put to the inconvenience of attending at court to defend himself.

In a rural society in which few people had a modern type sense of civil duty, individuals willingly perjured themselves for their kinsmen or patrons. And, such testimony proved adequate, there were always professional witnesses hanging about the law courts, ready, for a small fee, to present whatever evidence was required.<sup>10</sup> In 1914 F. E. Lyautey, the Bhagalpur District Officer, commented in his official annual report that

No one who has not heard at first hand such tales as I have can imagine the utter and cruel injustice now habitually worked in the name of justice through our Civil Courts, simply because a most tangled web of procedure has put the poorer man, the less educated, at the mercy of any unscrupulous man who chooses to run him by litigation.<sup>11</sup>

Yet it was because of its deficiencies that the judicial system operated as an effective bulwark of British rule. If the judicial system had operated more fairly, then it might have been employed by the disadvantaged in order to improve their position, thus upsetting the social order upon which British rule rested. Through their corruption, the courts reinforced and legitimized the dominance of the rich and the powerful. And through its indecisiveness and tardy pace, the judicial system operated as a 'safety valve', providing a forum in which wealthy antagonists could let off their tensions and fight themselves to a financial standstill.

The police force operated in conjunction with the judicial system to preserve order. In north Bihar the core of the police force consisted of 3,000 trained career policemen. An auxiliary body of 26,000 chowkidars, or village watch

men, selected members of the trained force. The village  
 tribals recruited a village headman (choukidar) for each  
 50 members of the population and a village headman  
 portion to the number of villages. There were  
 choukidars in each village. The choukidars were  
 their home villages. They were usually sons of and  
 generally inherited their posts from fathers or uncles.  
 They were used for guarding the village, houses,  
 houses, and possessions against theft, robbing, thefts,  
 deaths, crimes and unusual events. The choukidars  
 station, and assisting the police in the investigation of  
 crime and the apprehension of criminals. In payment they  
 received a salary Rs. 3 to Rs. 5 a month raised by a levy  
 on the inhabitants of the village.

An official appointed committee drew them among  
 local landlords, the peasant go-betters, and rich  
 peasants, known as a choukidari pan-hayat or anam, bore  
 the responsibility of paying the choukidars from the  
 villages and for receiving, directing and paying the  
 choukidars. Partly because they now pay the  
 choukidars tended to be more alert and correct. Not in-  
 frequently, they operated in connection with local landlords.  
 Their usual remuneration and their employment by a committee  
 made up of local landlords greatly improved their independence.  
 The choukidars Anand A. Yang comments, were never  
 successfully incorporated into the official system. In-  
 stead, they operated as the functionaries of the land-  
 holders' systems of control. The best that the author  
 of the official Bihar and Orissa Yearbook could say  
 to say of them was that a large minority of choukidars did  
 their work with remarkable efficiency, and that no other  
 class could perform these duties as cheaply.

The basic unit of police operations was the police station  
 or thana. These two terms were used interchangeably,  
 and denoted both the actual police station (thana building)  
 and the territory over which it had jurisdiction. Each  
 district had some ten to twenty police stations, which  
 meant that each station had jurisdiction over areas of  
 tens of square miles populated by thousands of people.  
 In Darbhanga in 1961, for example, there were twelve  
 police stations and ten police outposts, manned by a total  
 of 432 policemen. These policemen operated in an area of  
 1,148 square miles inhabited by 1,412,611 people. In

Darbhanga, there was one policeman to every 6.7 square miles and to every 5,999 members of the population.

The staff of each thana consisted of a dozen or two constables under the direction of a Writer Head Constable, so called because of his literacy, and under the overall control of a Sub-Inspector. The constables were unarmed except for lathis while the Sub-Inspector carried a revolver. Often, a couple of old shotguns lay about the thana, for use against bandits and ruffians. The thana staff, with the assistance of the local chaukidars, handled the routine police duties of the locality.

When a situation threatened to get out of control the local police could call for reinforcements from the Armed Reserve, a unit armed with muskets and made up of men seconded from the main police force for a two-year period of special training. In 1941 this unit consisted of 1,280 officers and men, of whom 400 were stationed in north Bihar. Help could also be requested from the Bihar and Orissa Military Police, an elite police unit of well-armed, highly trained men divided into four companies, two of which were mounted. One company, the Gurkha Military Police Company, comprised 12 officers and men stationed at Muzaffarpur town, the other three companies were stationed south of the Ganges, delegated to protect the provincial capital, Patna, and the south Bihar coal fields. These units, recruited from among ex-army men, were under the command of the provincial Inspector General of Police. The military proved the last resort. From 1942 a company of British infantry was based at Muzaffarpur town. Before then the nearest military help was south of the Ganges at Dinapat town, six miles west of Patna, the home base of a British infantry battalion.

In north Bihar, a policeman's lot was not a happy one. It involved night duty, travel over difficult country, and physical danger. Because of its financial difficulties the provincial government kept the wages of the police to a minimum. Constables usually came from high caste but impoverished backgrounds and earned a wage in 1941 of Rs. 30 per month. Unskilled labourers earned about the same task and the railway and postal employees earned more. Most constables compensated themselves for their poor pay and hard working conditions by extorting money

and by accepting bribes. Indeed the opportunity to profit by corrupt practices helped greatly to attract recruits to the police force.<sup>31</sup>

Not was corruption limited to the lower ranks. Writer Head Constables earned twice as much as constables but had a better education, came from a higher social stratum and were accustomed to a higher standard of living. A Writer Head Constable could not live on his pay and even if he wished to run straight he found himself driven to dishonesty. The Writer Head Constable, according to Inspector General R. J. Hirst, was the cancer of the force, spreading his evil influence above and below him. The rank above the Writer Head Constable was that of the Sub Inspector. In his secret report of 1929 Hirst commented revealingly that 'some of our Sub Inspectors enter the service with the desire to earn an honest living and some of that number contrive to keep their honest purpose'.<sup>32</sup>

Among the more highly paid and predominantly British higher ranks, the Inspectors and District Superintendents of Police, corruption was less frequent, though here it also existed. In 1909 and 1910 the administration established the four Inspectors along with four Sub Inspectors and three Head Constables had been drawn into the network of corruption which Police Superintendent Frank Lockwood Halsey had created in Darbhanga and adjoining districts. The official investigation also revealed the collusion of several other policemen.

The Russell case posed a dilemma for the administration. Some of the suspected policemen refused to give any evidence to the investigation committee, while others provided ample information thus establishing a strong case against themselves. Would it be fair to punish those who had given information, while those who had refused to co-operate escaped punishment because there was insufficient concrete evidence against them? Eventually, in a decision which reveals official acceptance that a certain level of corruption was unavoidable, the administration dismissed only Russell and his closest accomplice, and merely subjected the other culprits to departmental disciplinary action.<sup>33</sup>

Many policemen supplemented dishonesty with brutality. The Indian Police Commission of 1902 revealed numerous instances in which policemen had beaten up convicts, suspects and witnesses and recorded some incidents of torture<sup>51</sup> Because of their behaviour people feared and distrusted the police and did not assist them in the execution of their duties<sup>52</sup> Their work also suffered because of their sparse numbers. As Table 1.4 illustrates, Bihar and Orissa spent the least on police per head of population and had the lowest proportion of police to population of any of the provinces of British India.

TABLE 1.4

Ratio of people to police and cost of police in provinces of British India, 1929

Jurisdiction	People to Each Policeman	Cost per 1,000 of Population
Bihar & Orissa	2,372	236
Bengal	1,853	314
Assam	1,772	303
United Provinces	1,343	328
Madras	1,526	370
Central Provinces	1,259	424
Punjab	1,053	481
Bombay	776	700
Burma	954	893

Source Adapted from table in GLB, *Statutory Commission*, XII, p. 389.

Policemen formed part of a garrison dotted across the countryside, rather than active participants in the day



[illegible]

... a 'Limited Bay'.<sup>54</sup>

[illegible]

## IV

Throughout the nineteenth century the Bihar population had been increasing. In the eighteenth century famine and the recurrent warfare during the final years of Mughal rule, had kept the population down. But during the nineteenth century the Pax Britannica combined with effective famine relief measures to permit steady population growth. In 1800 vast tracts of north Bihar had been forest or savannah, but by 1850 most of the remaining uncolonised areas had been brought under the plough. In 1850 the first year for which reliable census figures are available north Bihar had a population of 11,141,767. The population grew at the rate of 1.5 per cent annually. An average of 1.5 per cent population growth continued in the ensuing decades.

To judge from the figures of the economic census, the total size of the region's population remained relatively constant between 1850 and 1900. However it should be noted that famine, cholera and dysentery and epidemics in 1897-98 caused heavy mortality which means that the 1900 and 1901 census figures do not indicate accurately the size of the population in most of the preceding decade.<sup>11</sup>

In the period from 1800-1850, with the Pax Britannica brought to the diseases more effectively under control the population expansion continued. The rate of growth was slower than in the south Bihar valley of population in Bihar. Muradpur and Patna. A survey in 1850 one British official had remarked that

A thought extended by the figures for a few more villages district is such as to show that Muradpur, the portion of north Bihar which comprises the three taluqas of Saran, Muradpur and Patna, has a more teeming population than any other tract of equal area in Bengal or Eastern Bengal.<sup>12</sup>

During the course of the twentieth century, political or economic became particularly frequent in this part of north Bihar.

During the nineteenth century there had been sufficient untended land in the region to absorb the rising population

TABLE 1.3

Population, Population Density and Decennial Change in north Bihar, 1881-1951

Year	Population	Population per square mile (Total Area = 21,406 Sq. Miles)	Decennial Change	Percentage Change
1881	13,169,378	615	-	
1891	13,977,588	653	+ 808,210	+ 6.14
1901	13,995,889	654	+ 18,301	+ 0.13
1911	14,293,479	668	+ 297,590	+ 2.13
1921	14,186,246	663	- 107,233	- 0.75
1931	15,316,708	716	+ 1,130,462	+ 7.97
1941	16,899,665	789	+ 1,582,957	+ 10.34
1951	18,392,836	859	+ 1,493,171	+ 8.84

Source: Censuses of India 1881-1951. Figures discount south gangetic sections of Monghyr and Bhagalpur.





gave the stability of the zamindari system that they required, through the agency of the Court of Wards, protected zamindars' estates from bankruptcy and disintegration.<sup>45</sup> The contradiction between economic rationality and political expediency could not have been more complete. Overall, the agrarian economy of north Bihar stagnated so that the rest of the framework maintained by Indian rulers, rulers, but by virtue of its inclusion within an imperial system remained vulnerable to fluctuations in the world economy.<sup>46</sup>

Population increase pressed most heavily on the poor peasants. With growing numbers competing for the right to share crop land and vying for employment as agrarian labourers, the bargaining position of the poor peasants became steadily worse. Some resorted to migration, either temporarily or permanently. For example, during the slack period in the agrarian cycle in densely populated Bihar around 10 per cent of the population migrated to Bengal and elsewhere in search of work.<sup>47</sup>

When times were particularly hard, poor peasants also resorted to crime.<sup>48</sup> In 1919, 31 per cent of all convictions were for one month or less, and 54 per cent of all prisoners were serving sentences of three months or less. One British official concluded that 'A very large proportion of these short-term convicts are driven by want of food to the commission of petty theft'.<sup>49</sup>

The pressure of population increase also threatened the position of the middle peasants. They had sufficient land to avoid having to sell their labour, but further subdivision of their land through inheritance threatened to cast them into the ranks of the poor peasants. They sought to acquire extra land in order to avert this development.

Population increase both benefited and disadvantaged the small landlords and rich peasants. It benefited them by increasing their leverage over those to whom they rented out their lands and over those whom they employed as labourers. Yet like the middle peasants, the break up of their holdings through inheritance threatened them with a decline in wealth, power and status.

By the beginning of the twentieth century a Britisher had greatly fragmented zamindari property. In many instances, formerly influential zamindar families had descended into the ranks of the middle peasants. The history of one Rajput family typified the fate of many. This family had migrated into Saran in 1708 and had acquired control of the villages of Gangapur and Bhagar. During the nineteenth century the property of the family became divided as successive generations of descendants inherited smaller and smaller shares.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the emergence of fragmentation threatened rich peasants and therefore they and small landlords continually attempted to increase the area of land over which they had control.<sup>2</sup>

## V

During the first half of this century north Bihar's population steadily increased but its economy continued to stagnate. This circumstance underlay the political discontent which characterised the region during the period from 1917 to 1947. Its influence can be seen repeatedly clearly in the disputes and confrontations that involved over the use and distribution of land. Its relationship with national agitation cannot be established directly but it seems certain that the pressure of population growth created a reservoir of tensions and antagonisms on which the nationalist movement drew. And more directly, nationalist propaganda stressed the need for a government for the lack of economic development.

The first outburst of mass unrest occurred in the period between 1917 and 1923. This turbulence may be related to the high prices and scarcity prevalent in these years. War-induced economic dislocation increased the prices of consumer goods and a succession of bad seasons resulted in food grains being in scarce supply and high prices. Scarcity and high prices prevailed in 1915, 1917, and 1919 and high prices continued throughout the 1920s. Most people had few reserves with which to tide themselves over even one bad year, and suffered greatly from a recurrence of bad times.

The poor peasants suffered most. The wages for labour remained relatively steady but from them labourers had

prices had risen.

The first of these is the fact that the  
 majority of the people who are  
 involved in the problem are not  
 aware of the fact that they are  
 involved in the problem. This is  
 a very serious problem, and it  
 is one that must be solved if  
 the situation is to be improved.  
 The second of these is the fact  
 that the people who are involved  
 in the problem are not aware of  
 the fact that they are involved  
 in the problem. This is a very  
 serious problem, and it is one  
 that must be solved if the  
 situation is to be improved.  
 The third of these is the fact  
 that the people who are involved  
 in the problem are not aware of  
 the fact that they are involved  
 in the problem. This is a very  
 serious problem, and it is one  
 that must be solved if the  
 situation is to be improved.

In actuality the past, present and may come  
 down to the members of the village who have been  
 fighting, the high, present and that higher than grain  
 (from a seed) that is at their very core and  
 when the present comes from the present and the at least  
 much they have a great deal of and the at least  
 to be made ready for, present and the at least  
 from the grain, the grain, the grain, the grain, the grain  
 and the grain, the grain, the grain, the grain, the grain  
 the grain, the grain, the grain, the grain, the grain  
 the grain, the grain, the grain, the grain, the grain

The author is aware that even at a high, general level the background is marked by the influence of the political situation of the author, but tries to minimize it. The background and also that the research, however, was conducted in a broad sense can only be evaluated in very general terms.



Partly this is a problem of sources. The statistics available are sketchy and unreliable and the qualitative evidence refers generally to developments within the province and its divisions rather than to the details of developments within the districts. Only a limited amount of detailed information is available about the particular situation at different stages of the agrarian cycle and about the variations in the incidence and impact of hard conditions in and between districts. Hence it is impossible to present a more fully detailed account of the chronologically and intra-regionally differential occurrence of scarcity and high prices.

But even if such an account existed it would only go part of the way in explaining the emergence and in defining the quality of popular dissidence in the 1917 to 1923 period. To understand this dissidence more fully, it is necessary to enquire in detail into the antecedents and course of particular protest campaigns. Accordingly the following three chapters deal in turn with anti-planter protest, with Swami Vidyanand's peasants' movement, and with the non-cooperation movement.

## NOTES

## Chapter 1

- 1 For information on north Bihar see J. Byrne, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Bhagalpur* (Calcutta 1911), S. P. John Houston, *Bihar: The Heart of India* (London, Calcutta 1953), M. N. Pandey, *Peasants, Politics, Sport and Work on the Nepali Frontier* (London 1979), I. S. S. O'Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Far Chhaganpur* (Calcutta 1907), *Saran* (Calcutta 1908), *Muzaffarpur* (Calcutta 1907), *Darbhanga* (Calcutta 1907), *Monohar* (Calcutta 1909), and *Purnea* (Calcutta 1911), O. K. H. Spate, A. T. A. Leamonth and B. H. Farmer, *India, Pakistan and Ceylon: The Regions* (London, 3rd ed. 1961), and M. J. Wilson, *History of Bihar Indigo Factories* (Calcutta 1885 and 1908).
- 2 The following account of the social structure of north Bihar in the early 20th century draws conceptually on Hamza Alavi's 'Peasants and Revolution' in Kathleenough and Har P. Sharma (eds.), *Imperialism and Revolution in South Asia* (New York-London 1973) and his *Rural Bases of Political Power in South Asia*, *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 4, 4, 1974. For information I have drawn on the Bengal District Gazetteers, the Survey and Settlement Reports and the decennial Census reports. For a preliminary discussion which emphasises the fluidity of the social structure for those above the subsistence level see Peter Robb, 'Hierarchy and Resources: Peasant Stratification in late Nineteenth Century Bihar', *Modern Asian Studies* 13, 1, 1979. Robb's analysis raises some interesting points, but deals only briefly with the relationship between indebtedness and social position and neglects the tendency in traditional society for kinship and factional networks to help protect cultivators against fluctuations in their individual fortunes.
- 3 It should be noted that middle peasants of high caste status were subject to ritual sanctions against the per-

formance of various agricultural tasks. Hence they were obliged to employ labourers for these tasks. However since the amount of land they controlled was small and they had limited resources these high caste middle peasants generally employed only one or two labourers and hired them only on a short term basis.

4. See Padma Anand Administrative Report [hereafter AAR], 10 August 1970, Collection [hereafter C XXXIV, 12A, Central Department [hereafter C] 1994.0, Raj Darbhanga Archives [hereafter RDA].
5. O'Malley, *Saran*, p.123.
6. Interview, Umarnath Tewari, Dumari village Darbhanga, 17 October 1976. See also Rajendra Prasad Autobiography, (Bombay 1961) pp. 1-2.
7. For a study of the local elite in one north Bihar village see Ramaswray Roy, Conflict and Cooperation in a North Bihar Village, *Journal of the Bihar Research Society*, XLIX, 1963.
8. At the turn of the century the two largest zamindars in north Bihar after the Maharaja of Darbhanga were the Maharaja of Pathwa and the Maharani of Bettiah who held respectively 561 and 1,814 square miles of property and paid Rs 20,000 and Rs 50,000 in land revenue. O'Malley, *Saran*, p. 43, Champaran pp. 41-2. By 1917, in the north Bihar districts of Saran, Champaran, Muzaffarpur, Darbhanga and Purnea there were only 75 estates which paid more than Rs 5,000 in land revenue. Only six of these estates paid more than Rs 100,000, 21 paid between Rs 15,000 and Rs 10,000 and 48 paid between Rs 5,000 and Rs 15,000. In the Bengal Presidency as a whole by 1907 only 190 estates paid more than Rs 5,000 in land revenue. The ownership of these 596 estates was shared between 1,178 people, of whom only 514 paid, as individuals, more than Rs 5,000 per year. Government of Bengal [hereafter GBN], Land Revenue Proceedings [hereafter LR], 1994, B 15710, July 1907, West Bengal Archives [hereafter WBA].
9. On the Darbhanga Raj and its rulers see Qayyumud-din Ahmed, *Origin and growth of the Darbhanga Raj* (1941-1966) based on some contemporary and unpublished documents. *Indian Historical Records Commission Proceedings* XXXVI Part II, 1961. (Lye Dewey, 'The History of Mithila and the Records of the Darbhanga Raj', *Modern Asian Studies* 10, 1976. Jata Shankar Jha,

- A History of Darbhanga Raj (Patna 1968) and Biography of an Indian Patriot: Maharaja Lakmishwar Singh of Darbhanga (Patna 1972). O'Malley, Darbhanga, pp. 14-6, Ashwari Prasad Singh, The Youngest Legislator of India: The Biography of the Hon'ble Maharajadhiraja Sir Kameshwar Singh Bahadur, K C I E of Darbhanga (Patna 1976) and P. V. Narayan Narayan Singh, History of Tirhut from the earliest times to the end of the nineteenth century (Calcutta 1922). See also the Maharajadhiraja Dr. Kameshwar Singh Memorial Volume Journal of the Bihar Research Society 31 VIII, 1942. For information about the Maithil Brahman Community, see Paul R. Brass, *Language, Religion and Politics in North India* (London 1974) and Hetukar Jha, 'Nation Building in a north Indian region: The Case of Mithila', unpublished manuscript. (Hetukar Jha of the Sociology Department, Patna University kindly permitted me to use this manuscript.) For details of Rameshwar Singh's activities as a leader of orthodox Hinduism, see Richard Gordon, 'The Hindu Mahasabha and the Indian National Congress 1915 to 1926', *Modern Asian Studies* 9, 2, 1975, pp. 155-160, 81. For the income and expenditure of the Darbhanga Raj see O'Malley, Darbhanga, p. 145. Extracts from the Annual Report of the 'Officiating Manager', (B.N.I.R. 48-49, May 1978, p. 7, Bihar State Archives [hereafter BSA]. Report on the Administration of the Darbhanga Raj 1914-1915, L XXXIV, L 1915, 16 RDA.
- 10 O'Malley, Darbhanga and Saran, Girish Mishra, *Agrarian Problems of Permanent Settlement: A Case Study of Champaran* (New Delhi 1978).
  - 11 See Ronald T. Herring, 'Radical Politics and Revolution in South Asia', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 7, 1, 1978.
  - 12 In all of the north Bihar districts except Purnea, Muslims formed around 12 per cent of the population. In Purnea, they comprised 43 per cent of the population, and were particularly numerous in the eastern half of the district. O'Malley, Purnea, pp. 58, 60. Centuries of Mughal rule had helped shape the aspect of north Bihar areas before the subjugation of women. Bihar was 'the most Pardah ridden province in India' and women from better off families rarely moved outside their homes. Women were second class citizens and any initiative to improve their lot elicited a hostile reaction. Sexual exploitation was allied with social and

economic exploitation and poor and low caste women were preyed on by money lenders, zamindars and rich peasants. Circular from Ramnandan Misra, All India Congress Committee Papers. Hereafter A.C.C.P., C 43 (vi) (vii) 1935, Nehru Memorial Library. Hereafter NMJ. Searchlight 24 Jan. 1930. Iha, Nation Building in Mithila, pp. 94-5.

- 13 In 1907 Muslims owned nine of the 75 estates in the districts of Saran, Champaran, Muzaffarpur, Darbhanga and Purnea that paid more than Rs 5 000 in land revenue. Separate figures for the north Cangetic sections, Monghyr and Bhagalpur districts are not available (B.N. 1R 175.4 B 02.10.1. v 1907, WBA).
- 14 *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (London 1967), p. 383.
- 15 See Ravinder Kumar, 'The Political Process in India, South Asia I, 771. In North Bihar Village' Ramashray Roy examines the history of factionalism in the village of Radhanagar from 1900 to 1960. For details about two factional conflicts in areas under the control of the Darbhanga Raj, see Brief of case of Charanjit Jha versus Nandhat Jha, f 10F C V (Criminal), Law Department. Hereafter I, 1920.21, RLA, Asstt Manager, Diary 28 May 1973, f 5 C XX7, G 9.2.23 RDA. For a perceptive analysis of factionalism in village India see A. T. Carter, 'Political Stratification and Unstable Alliances in Rural Western Maharashtra', *Modern Asian Studies*, 6, 4, 1972.
- 16 Roy, North Bihar Village, p. 100. Bihar Government Communique, Searchlight, 10 Feb. 1931. O'Malley Saran, p. 32.
- 17 O'Malley Monghyr p. 53. See also Byrne Bhagalpur p. 52.
- 18 M. N. Karna, Health, Culture and Community in a North Bihar Village. Ph.D. thesis, Patna University, 1960, Patihar AAR C XXXIV G 19 9-20 RDA. Maori, Nepal Frontier, pp. 137-8.
- 19 G. E. Owen, Bihar and Orissa in 192 (Patna 1922), pp. 42-4. See also Nandigar AAR, f 1074 G 1937-38, RDA.
- 20 Maori, Nepal Frontier p. 21.
- 21 'Not was the extent of literacy increasing rapidly. As of March 1921, only 4.27 per cent of the male, and 0.65 per cent of the female, or 2.43 per cent of the

- total population of the province was undergoing an  
attraction. *Ibid.* Bihar 1921, p. 112.
- 22 For general accounts of rioting see the annual G.B.O.,  
*Report on the Administration of the Police in the  
Province of Bihar* (and Orissa, Patna, annual various  
dates). The argument that follows draws on Anand A  
Yadav, 'The Agrarian Origins of Crime: A Study of  
Riots in Saran District, India, 1866-1920', *Journal of  
Social History*, X II, 2, Winter 1979.
- 23 Dharampur AAR, 13 March 1920 (BOC XXXIV, C  
1917-20, R 1A). See also O'Malley, *Purnea* pp. 130-1.
- 24 Roy, 'North Bihar Village', pp. 361-4.
- 25 Yang, *Riots in Saran*, p. 12. Unfortunately, however,  
our knowledge of clashes between district strata is  
limited because, as Frank Perlin points out, 'Only that  
conflict interfering with administration or manifested  
on such a scale as to be noticeable outside, is likely to  
be recorded, while conflict within the village, between  
castes or privileged and under-privileged landholders,  
is only too likely to escape the accounts'. See his  
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## Chapter 2

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